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THE AMERICAN FAMILY: OZZIE AND HARRIET  
DON'T LIVE NEXT DOOR ANY MORE

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ABSTRACT

The paper discusses a number of demographic and socioeconomic changes that have occurred with the American family over the past 20 years. The changes have been extremely fast and dramatic. Consequently, traditional supports for increasingly non-traditional families are not adequate. A discussion of changes in recreation and leisure behaviors is also included. Some suggestions are given on how recreation and park providers can offer support to the changing American family.

THE AMERICAN FAMILY: OZZIE AND HARRIET  
DON'T LIVE NEXT DOOR ANY MORE

Today's families have not just changed, they have dramatically changed in a very short time. The Cleavers, the Mitchells, and the Jetsons have been replaced by Kate and Allie, the Huxtables, and the Belvederes. Some of the most dramatic demographic and socioeconomic changes that have occurred in the past 20 years have been in family structure, makeup, and economic position.

Families are quite popular these days. According to a USA Today survey, our family typically makes us feel good. The survey found that nearly 80% of us are very satisfied with our families. Teenagers claim that they are most proud of their home and family. Over two-thirds of all divorcees remarry, typically within three years of the divorce.(9)

The Democratic National Convention seemed to have an underlying theme of children as we heard from Grandbaby Lily and letters written by children about being President. Republicans showed Grandpa George surrounded by his grandchildren. Issues of early childhood education, neonatal care and child care were debated as hotly as missiles, tariffs and insider trading. Probably because women make up 53% of the electorate.

A look at how the Census Bureau has defined a family over the years gives us a clue about how families have changed. In 1890, the Census

asked a household member how he/she was related to the family head. In 1940, the "family head" was changed to the "household head." In 1980, the terminology was changed to "householder." The 1990 Census will change in three ways to reflect today's families. For the first time, the Census will query about stepchildren (It is estimated that 16% of all married-couple households contain at least one stepchild), foster children and unmarried or cohabitating partners.(16)

The long-term consequences of these changes are still unknown. What is known is that societal institutions and mores have yet to catch up, leaving families on their own to find new ways to cope. A "social safety net" or support system developed for the Cleavers is allowing the more diverse families of today to slip through and fall out. As one consequence, the homeless are made up of more families. Recreation and park agencies who provide social services to families and children can help mend some of these gaps, and maybe catch a few of these families down on their luck. But, first, let's identify some of the demographic and socioeconomic changes that have occurred with the family.

#### CHANGES IN THE AMERICAN FAMILY

We remain a nation of families. Eighty-five percent (85%) of Americans are members of a family. In the 1950's, a larger majority (93%) of Americans were in families.(19) Ten percent (10%) of American households consist of a working father, housewife mother and children less than eighteen years old. There are nearly as many households with one person as there are "traditional" family households.(21)

Our population is becoming less youthful. In 1970, people under the age of eighteen made up 34% of the American public. By the year 2010, that proportion is expected to drop to 21% and remain level. Families with children are a decreasing proportion of households. In 1970, 45% of households had children. In 1983, the percentage dropped ten points, to 35%.(19)

Many children will live with one parent some time during their youth. One out of four children in the U.S. lives with one parent today. In 1960, one out of ten children enjoyed the company of a sole parent. Sixty percent of children will live with only one parent for at least a year before they turn eighteen.(21)

Family life is not the same for all races. The majority (68%) of children, yet clear minority (38%) of black children, live with both biological parents. The probability that a child will live with one parent is 42% for white children but 86% for black children. About half of white children who live with neither parent live with two adoptive parents. Only 14% of black children who do not live with their parents enjoy two adoptive parents. In 1960, twenty percent of all black U.S. families were headed by women. In 1980, the percentage jumped to 47%.

Families consist of more people, even as number of children born to a family decreases. A total of 1,300 stepfamilies are formed every day.

Single parent households are typically headed by women. Between 1959 and 1984, the share of U.S. children living in fatherless families doubled from 9% to 20%. However, by the year 2000, the fastest growing households will be those headed by a single male.

Working moms are and will continue to be a significant part of the labor force. In the 1950's, forty percent of women were working. By 2000, an even larger percent (72%) of women will be working. (19) Nearly 12% of mothers with children less than six years old worked in 1950. In 1984, over half (51.8%) of these mothers are in the labor force. For mothers of school-aged children, the percent employed increased from 28.3% in 1950 to 65.4% in 1984. (5)

Many children are poor. Fourteen million children live in poverty, the largest single population group. (6) Poverty rates for children during the 1960's fell from 27% to 14%. (19) In the 1980's, the rate has begun to climb from 16% to 20%. Twenty-five percent of preschool children are poor. One out of six white children and one out of two black children are poor. (6)

Low paying "pink collar" jobs contribute to the poverty of children. The poorest household types are single parent households headed by a child's biological mother. Over half of all children living with their mothers only were poor in 1980. In 1960, only 24% of children in these households were poor. Of those households headed by a biological father, the percentage with less than \$10,000 was only 21%. Women continue to make \$.70 to every \$1 made by a man. (6) From 1970 to 1984 families financially supported by women grew 80%.

Here are a few consequences to summarize these changes.

- \* Women are still raising the children, but many do so without the support (economic and emotional) of a spouse.

- \* Children still live in families that include adults, but "mom" and "dad" support may not come from biological parents.

- \* Mothers are managers--professionally at work and by necessity of households. Many have given up the constant daily nurturing and maintenance of children to work, thus relying on the support of others for these important, yet non-lucrative, tasks.

- \* As the nation ages, the term "family" does not necessarily mean the presence of children or people living under the same roof.

- \* Children, especially children from black households, learn how to support a family early in their lives.

- \* The result of lack of support to families has forced many children to live in poverty.

## FAMILY PLAY

Family leisure is often a paradox. Adult activities may be chosen out of obligation to other family members rather than freely chosen. However, family activities occur with companions, which research shows is the most satisfying form of leisure. Eighty percent of Americans say that family-oriented activities were most important to them, and spending time with the family was the most important use of leisure time.(9)

Some of the activities most frequently done with the family include (in decreasing order of frequency) watching television, playing sports, shopping, talking, and visiting relatives.(9) Research does not clearly support the claim that a family who plays together, stays together. However, parents with minor (less than age 18) children living at home are more actively involved in outdoor recreation than all adults in the U.S. Families say that sports contribute to the health and fitness of youth. Parents are most likely to encourage their children to (in decreasing order) swim, play baseball, tennis, basketball, golf, soccer and, last, football.(9, p. 8)

Families travel together. In the households that travel, the children go along 70% of the time. Children are an important consideration behind these families' travel decisions.(9)

Marketers of some sports equipment advertise the family use of the equipment. However, these marketers are beginning to question what is a family sport, if there is such an activity. They see families that can hardly arrange schedules to meet for dinner let alone for a game of tennis that may take an hour or more. Also, families are of such disparate ages that investment in the equipment alone would be enough to discourage use. Investment in bicycling for a family of four almost approaches \$500, including car racks, helmets and baskets. Then, it takes a considerable time investment to do the activity. Safe bicycling, for example, only takes place on designated bikeways which most likely involves travel.

## CHILD'S PLAY

When we look at what children like to do for recreation, we see a familiar pattern--active, group activities. The most popular activities for youth aged seven through seventeen in the 1980's are team sports, swimming, bicycling and rollerskating. The same activities were popular among the youth in the 1960's, except that horseback riding replaced rollerskating. Teenagers (aged 12-17) typically are the most active recreators--in number of activities and days of participation--than any other age group.(15)

The popular activities of youth reflect what providers typically offer. The 1984 National Survey of Children and Youth Fitness illustrated the importance of nonschool organizations such as public recreation departments. The majority (80%) of youth participation in recreation and sports took place outside of schools.

A New York Times article (July 4, 1988) groans about the demise of "catch." Using a simple activity such as catch illustrates how the play of children has changed. Catch requires at least two people to play. Fathers, and interested moms, are not around, and neither are playmates. The activity is not usually played by an organized group that has regularly scheduled practices, therefore, making it difficult to find playmates who are overly scheduled and at other practices. Mail order toy catalogues do not even feature mitts.

Children's play is generally described as spontaneous, creative and typically involves "messaging around." However, depending on how much day care outside the home a child needs, the child is programmed when to play, learn, rest and eat. For those children not in structured day care settings, the opportunities for spontaneous play are limited because playmates are. Going over to a friend's house becomes a major scheduling ordeal because of parents' and children's packed schedules as well as safety concerns. Sometimes parent's race on the fast track transfers itself on the children to produce "stress for success" pressure on the child. (Anna Quindlen)

In 1986, the President's Commission on Americans Outdoors heard that "messaging around" in natural outdoor settings was the best way to instill an outdoor ethic or respect for the natural environment. Opportunities for children to "mess around" -- build forts, rearrange streambeds, dig holes, chase squirrels -- are increasingly lost as open space vanishes. We designate "parks" to compensate for this loss, but parks come with a set of prescribed behaviors that do not include much terrain alteration. But, as one author suggests, perhaps the pictures of missing kids on milk cartons have dampened the appeal of Huck Finn type adventures.(12)

#### FAMILY SUPPORTS

The next twenty years will witness profound changes in the institutions that traditionally support the increasingly non-traditional family. By the same token, we can also look forward to some profound changes from those institutions that directly affect the quality of families' lives -- employers and government.

#### GOVERNMENT

Tax policy influences family income. Between 1960 and 1984, average tax rate affecting single and married people without children did not change. The average tax rate for a couple with two children increased 43%, with four children an increase of 223%.(5) After tax income decreased by an average of 7.6% between 1980 to 1984 for 20% of American families with lowest incomes. For the 20% of families with highest incomes, after tax income rose an average of 8.7%. The Tax Reform Act of 1986 exempts six million low income Americans from any federal tax liability.(6) More than one hundred bills are before Congress concerning child care.(3)

## EMPLOYERS

Eight million working mothers depend on child care and spend \$11 billion a year for this privilege.(1) Over half a million working women lose time from their job because of problems with day care arrangements. One out of three women who stopped work in 1986 did so to devote more time to their home and children. Only one out of a hundred men stopped work for this reason. The Conference Board, a research organization on businesses, claims that 3,500 companies offer some form of child care support to workers. This support includes flexible spending accounts where money from an employee's gross income is paid toward child care (1,500 companies) to referral services (1,000 companies) to direct operation of day care centers (775 companies, including 500 hospitals).(15)

The Bureau of Labor Statistics, however, document that only ten percent of American business provides specific child care benefits. The majority of these benefits include employer-sponsored day care (1.6%), assistance with child care expenses (3.1%), child care information and referral (4.3%), flexible scheduling (44%), flexible leave (43%), and working at home (8.5%).(3)

Merck & Company, a pharmaceutical company and innovative leader in child care options, estimates it saves an average pretax value of \$12,000 per employee from its family policies. The cost of losing an employee and training a new person is about one and a half times the lost employee's salary. The employee turnover rate at this company is 4%, compared with a national average of 14%.(1)

Other research shows that problems with child care are the most significant predictor of absenteeism and unproductive time at work. One bank pays 75% of the cost of sick child care, an average of \$20 per day. The bank would lose \$140 per day if a middle manager lost that day at work. That benefit saves the company 87%.(18) Companies, such as this bank, are learning that benefits that include family care options attract a healthy supply of workers and keep them.

Even the military is beginning to recognize that family needs are very much on the minds of new recruits. The attitude "if we wanted you to have a family, we would have issued you one" is not relevant. The Navy employs 600,000 (mostly married) people who have 706,000 family members. Concern over family care detracts from the mental alertness needed for military readiness.

Even though employers are learning the importance of child care and their employees, most children (57%) are cared for by a family member, primarily grandparents. If parents cannot find child care support from their family or employer, private businesses are available. However, many of these businesses pay full-time workers, usually women, on the average of \$163/week, or \$8,500 per year. At that salary, cashiers, bartenders, and janitors earn more than child care providers with a college degree.(14)

Other research shows that family leave laws are receiving more support. Laws in Wisconsin and Maine grant up to six to eight weeks every two years of unpaid leave to care for aging parents as well as sick or new children. According to the National Conference of State Legislators, more than one hundred bills relating to leave are pending in the states.

## RECREATION PROVIDERS AS FAMILY SUPPORTERS

What do all these statistics tell us as recreation providers about the family and our role in promoting the family? People use recreation to support a quality family life. Recreation institutions can benefit from this position and provide a support system for families to do this. Because of the diversity of family life, there are few role models for families to follow. They are making life up as they go and relying on an ever-increasing network of outside supporters. Here are some suggestions on how recreation agencies can provide support to families.

Provide opportunities for the parent(s) and other family members to play with their children. Recognize that leisure time is precious to families by offering more chances for open, non-structured use of facilities, promotion of parks, bikeways, and trails close to people's homes, and programs that encourage family (in all its diversity) to participate.

Provide opportunities for child care. Recognize the limitations of mobility for children in child care. Arrange opportunities for child care providers to use facilities.

Provide enabling services, especially transportation, to allow children and adults with mobility difficulties to participate in programs.

Aggressively seek participation of disenfranchised groups, such as racial and ethnic minorities.

Serve as a strong advocate to ensure and maintain quality recreation programs for children, youth and families." It is not unheard-of for school bonds to be defeated by a voting elderly public. Older people express their political desires through the voting booths, an option not available to children. Therefore, recreation agencies have a dual mission of satisfying the recreation interests of the increasingly elderly population, yet ensuring that traditional customers (the children) are not neglected.

Advocate the need for more places to recreate and play close to people's homes, not simply more programs.



## THE FUTURE

Some demographers predict a return to a family oriented society similar to the 1950's. They base this prediction on the increase in the proportion of men in the population by 2000.(11) However, we still won't find Ozzie and Harriet living next door because women will continue to work in record numbers. Our next door neighbors may resemble the Golden Girls with their spouses and part-time grandchildren.

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